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ABSTRACT

Ideas on the necessity for evaluating alternative programs and on developing evaluation programs are examined in this position paper. Many alternative schools, opposed to measurement of their program from a philosophical and defensive standpoint, view evaluation in a negative light because the purpose is not understood. However, evaluation can be an integral part of an ongoing formative evaluation process; establish credibility for an innovative program; identify workable educational strategies; and set the stage for student evaluation. Problems and issues in alternative education are varied. One of the problems mentioned is that the stereotype of a good evaluation is one where no negative information is brought forth -- whereas, in contrast, a good evaluation provides direction for program improvement. Another problem is that an inadequacy of evaluation instruments and evaluators exists. Other issues and problems relate to stringent demands, the role of behavioral objectives, and evaluation by external sources. In summary, evaluation needs to be an integral part of the planning process with the staff and the central administration establishing goals and objectives which can be evaluated. (SJM)

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changing schools

An Occasional Newsletter on Alternative Schools

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EVALUATING ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS

By Mike Hickey

A Position Paper
Prepared by the
National Consortium on
Educational Alternatives

EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

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Introduction

The "state of the art" in evaluating alternative education programs can best be summarized in two statements: (1) an art it is not; and (2) the only state it is in is a state of general chaos.

Given this somewhat negative overture, members of the task group on evaluation have addressed themselves to five main concerns:

1. some reason for the state of evaluation
2. purposes of evaluation in alternative programs
3. problems and issues of evaluating alternatives
4. consideration of some evaluative processes for alternatives
5. roles for the Consortium in these evaluative efforts.

It should be noted at the outset that this dicsussion focuses on program evaluation. This focus is necessitated by time limitations for the work group sessions in this conference and is not meant to imply any particular priority. Neither does it fail to recognize the interrelationship of program evaluation with evaluation of students and staff.

"State of the Art"

At present, many individuals who are immersed in alternative education programs are resistant to evaluation of their program, particularly by an outside person or group. This resistance is more than just paranoia, although there is some of that, too. This resistance is based on an honest belief that evaluation is philosophically antithetical to the freedom and lack of overbearing structure upon which many alternatives are based.

Another factor contributory to this situation is that of the reactionary defensiveness of some individuals in some programs. This defensiveness, often characterized by a demand to be left alone, again is sometimes justified when one considers the tenuous existence of most alternative programs.

This defensiveness referred to above may stem in part from the abuse of evaluation through its application as a negative force, e.g., "proving" that a program is not effective. There is never justification for such an approach, but that it does occur can be readily verified by scanning the brief literature of the alternative school movement. Tests were developed to measure, not to classify, but the distortions of their purpose in order to group, to track, to categorize children have occurred with alarming frequency.

Beyond such flagrant misuses, however, much of the hostility toward evaluation has arisen from failure to understand what evaluation is all about. The blame for this failure rests equally with both sides: the evaluator for not clarifying what he is doing and why, and for imposing an evaluation design on the program; the program director for not requiring full explanation of the process and its underlying rationale and for not taking the initiative for developing, at least partially, the evaluation design.

The foregoing factors then--philosophical opposition, defensiveness, negative use of evaluation, and failure to define or to understand the purpose of evaluation--all contribute at least partially to the current negative aura which pervades evaluation in alternative education today. All of these concerns are valid, but the answer lies in eliminating their basis, not in rejecting evaluation. For alternative education programs, at least for those in public education, evaluation is part of today's reality, the price to be paid for spending the public's money. Alternatives are compatible with evaluation, especially if we sieze the initiative and develop ways of improving the process and using it for the purposes of alternative education. The public is demanding accountability of its education programs and accountability means, in part, evaluation. If you still can't buy it that's fine, but you'd better find yourself another sugar daddy.

Purposes of Evaluation in Alternatives

Evaluation is essential in alternative programs for at least four specific reasons. However, at a more general philosophical level the case might be stated as the maxim, "anything worth doing is worth doing well." This is especially true where the lives of children and their future in our society are concerned. It can be assumed that any program in existence was developed to meet a need. Evaluation can provide some indication of the extent to which that need is being met. To reject these indicators and settle for the aroma of success is intellectually a cop out.

The specific purposes of evaluation in alternative programs are at least four.

First, and perhaps of highest priority, is the purpose of internal self-improvement for the program, which in turn relates to the ongoing planning process (informal though it may be).

Second, as a basis for establishing the credibility of the alternative program, evaluation must meet the demands of a variety of "publics." Like it or not, the regular program has established its credibility through the process of historical endurance during easier times. Alternative education must be prepared for assaults on its integrity because (a) it is a change, (b) it implies some weakness or lack in the regular program and (c) it diverts funds from the regular program. The alternatives--for awhile at least--will continuously be called upon to defend their honor through evaluation. Whether or not the program evaluates, other people do.

Third, a primary rationale for the existence of alternatives within public education is that they become the means or the process by which public education evolves. Realistically, some strategies for educational alternatives will not work. Evaluation provides a base for identifying those that work and those that don't. From those that don't, needed changes in the alternative program can be made. From those that do work, lessons can be learned which will eventually change the regular system.

Finally, the evaluation of student progress is difficult without an adequate understanding of where the program itself stands.

There are other reasons for evaluation of alternative education programs, but these four stand out as being of high priority.

Problems and Issues

They following discussion of problems and issues in alternative education covers a wide variety, but by no means exhausts the issues. Likewise, the order of discussion is not intended to connote any priority. For purposes of brevity, each is identified and somewhat defined, but no attempt is made in this working paper to establish or discuss all the ramifications of these salient issues.

1. The evaluation process has unfortunately been stereotyped as one in which a "good" evaluation develops no negative information. This should not be the case. Negative evaluation data may be more productive in terms of the direction for program change they indicate, as opposed to positive data which often masks non-productive (but non-negative) program elements. A good evaluation, then, is one which provides information and direction for program improvement.

2. The inadequacy of many evaluation instruments--especially within the affective domain--is well known. However, all too often this fact is used as a rationalization for not evaluating. In alternative education particularly the claim is frequently heard that "we're doing something different. It can't be evaluated like an ordinary school program." While there is some justification to claims of weakness in many affective measurement instruments and techniques, substantial progress has been made and it behooves us in alternative education to keep abreast of these developments. Excellent examples of these efforts include:

   a. the evaluation design for the METRO High School Program, Chicago (Center for New Schools, 431 South Dearborn, Suite 1527, Chicago 60605)
   b. the Ford Foundation's evaluation of Philadelphia's Parkway Program (Cambridge: OSTI).
   c. THEORY INTO PRACTICE, Ohio State University, College of Education Journal. The April, 1969, issue focused on research in affective education.

3. The "hard data syndrome" is another rationalization for not evaluating, or for misusing evaluation. It equates evaluation with standardized tests and discounts the value of "soft" data. In education, particularly alternative programs, it must be recognized that a variety of measurement techniques are required. While the precision and nature of the data may vary considerably, each plays an essential part in the process. We must accept the fact that indirect measures become as important to evaluation and program improvement as conventional direct ones.

4. Frequently, the evaluation demands placed on alternative programs are far more stringent than any within the regular program. Like it or not, the fact is that the regular program has established its credibility through its historical endurance, while alternative programs are, per se, suspect. Although inherently unfair, this tendency may in the long run be to the ultimate benefit of alternative education in that we are developing evaluation concurrently with program development.

5. Along with accountability has come the era of behavioral objectives (or b.o., as some refer to it). The constant state of flux that is education today has caused many educators--alternative and otherwise--to rush headlong into objectives as a source of stability and "permanence." Let's agree on something: much of what is important to the learning process cannot be adequately defined in behavioral --or other wise measurable--terms. Given that assumption, one must recognize that objectives can only be viewed as a partial solution to the evaluation problem. Objectives appropriate for alternative programs need to be developed by individuals sensitive to both the needs and the processes of affective learning. Objectify where you can, but with full cognizance of its limitations. Is it not better that the program personnel set the program's objectives than to have them imposed entirely by an outside evaluator?

6. A major problem in evaluating alternative programs is the lack of qualified evaluators who have the sensitivities and insights necessary to fully understand the concept of alternative education and measure its implementation. One means of compensating for this lack is the development by the staff of well defined, specific objectives wherever possible, so that the evaluator is forced to evaluate the program on those terms. Any efforts the alternative program staff is able to make to reduce the feelings of hostility and suspicion which often develop toward evaluators will probably aid in reducing the possibility of irrelevant interpersonal factors prejudicing the interest of the program from the evaluator's standpoint.

7. A present, the majority of program evaluations conducted in the area of alternative education are imposed by some outside source, such as a categorical funding source, or the District administration. The evaluation is conducted to meet the needs of the District or the funding source and to provide information for decision making of various kinds. However, what is often overlooked is the program improvement aspect of evaluation and the internal needs of the program which should also be considered in any evaluation that is conducted. Obviously any program can be over evaluated and most measurement techniques in use today often involve intrusions into the instructional program. By coordinating the evaluation and considering both the internal and external needs for evaluative data, such disruption can be reduced and the evaluation process can be more cognizant of the interrelated needs of the program and its supporting agency.

8. The emphasis in evaluation, particularly in the era of behavioral objectives, has been on the product or outcome of the instructional process. Because many alternative education programs emphasize the process by which one takes place, new criteria for evaluation need to be developed which focus on that process. However, no program can be adequately evaluated solely on the basis of either product or of process criteria.

9. A common fault of people inexperienced in the evaluation of alternative programs is that they establish performance criteria on the basis of what the traditional program is supposed to be doing, whether or not that is an emphasis of the alternative program. Most alternative programs were developed to fill a need that was not being met by the regular school program. It stands to reason, therefore, that

alternative programs must be evaluated on the basis of what they were designed to do. For example, a fifty percent attendance level on the part of students in the dropout program may be a very positive effect of a given program. After all, the dropouts were previously totally out of school and therefore fifty percent attendance would be a marked improvement.

10. One of the arguments for alternative education has traditionally been that ours is a pluralistic society in which there is no clear cut majority and the needs of the various elements of that society differ substantially. In the process of evaluation this diversity becomes a problem in that education, including alternative programs, serves a variety of audiences. These range from the students and staff of the programs to the School Board, to the community, to various local and state political leaders, etc. Obviously some of these audiences are more directly related with the educational program and it is likely that each one of those may hold different expectations for the criteria of success within the same program. This is a dilemma which cannot readily be resolved, however awareness of the fact that such diverse expectations may exist can perhaps make the program more responsive, at least in part, to them.

11. A final problem is the unsubstantiated assumption that development in the cognitive domain of learning is neglected when a program emphasizes the effective and/or psychomotor domains in its instructional efforts. Education has traditionally focused only on the cognitive domain and the alternative education movement reflects a reaction to this overemphasis. However, critics of alternative education have indicated that the need still exists for "basic education," which is their terminology for the rote learning processes which often accompany cognitive learning. Much recent research has indicated that the attitude and self-concept of the learner has a profound effect on his receptivity to cognitive learning. While this factor incompasses more than simply evaluative concerns regarding alternative programs, it is an element which must be recognized in designing an evaluative process so as to avoid the tendency to measure only the more easily measurable cognitive elements.

Evaluation Processes for Alternative Programs

Evaluation within alternative programs cannot be separated from the planning process. It begins with an identification of needs and the establishment of goals and objectives based on those needs. By considering evaluation as part of the planning process, goals and objectives can be considered from the perspective of the ease with which they can be evaluated. This is meant to imply only that some means of evaluation can be established for practically any program objective, particularly if the need for evaluative data is established early enough in the program so that appropriate measures can be built in.

In order to maintain the integrity of alternative programs, it seems appropriate that the program staff be the primary source of need identification and the setting of goals and objectives for the program. However, because of the external evaluation needs (i.e., the central administration or the funding agency) the administrative unit responsible for the alternative program needs to review the goals and objectives, the evaluative procedure proposed by the program, and may then suggest additional objectives which were not considered, or possible modifications of the program objectives which may lend themselves more

directly to evaluation without diluting the intent of the program. As part of this process, the evaluative criteria are jointly established by the program staff at the central administration keeping in mind the internal needs of the program, as well as those of the outside agency.

Although what is evaluated in a program can be determined only by the objectives of that program, the following are some elements which might be appropriately evaluated in an alternative program. In each case it assumes that h the objective on which the item to be evaluated is based is self-evident to the reader.

1. Community attitude toward the program
2. Staff attitude and attitude change over the course of the program
3. Parental attitude
4. Student attitude
5. Community participation (i.e., as volunteers, on field trips, visits to the school)
6. Academic achievement (not for a success/failure judgment, but for diagnostic information which may be of use in certain situations)
7. Academic participation - this is differentiated from achievement in that it is intended to be descriptive data indicating how many students are taking what courses and for what extent of time
8. Attendance data from both teachers and students
9. Discipline and suspension figure
10. The extent and nature of feedback to the community
11. A follow up survey of program graduates
12. The holding power of the program
13. Changes in student-family relationships
14. Program development and growth, both in the size of the program and the scope of its offering
15. Student activities outside the school: Community work, social work, service
16. At the elementary level, the number of kids who dash out of the room at recess (in some schools recess is the most exciting thing that happens!)

While some might argue that many of these are trivial bases for evaluation, each of them is in part an indicator of something that might be happening in the program. The more specific evaluative data that can be developed and provided by the program itself to its critics and detractors, the more solid the image of the program becomes in the eyes of the public and even the regular school administration.

While one might very well decry the lack of adequate affective measures for alternative programs, it should be recognized that the academic element of the program does need to be evaluated. Standardized tests, although much maligned (and with some justification) if carefully selected can be a useful measurement instrument, provided they are not the only indicator that is used.

Role of the Consortium

The National Consortium for Alternatives in Education would seem to have a major role in the process of evaluation as it relates to alternative programs on the national level. The principal elements of this role for consideration

by the consortium might include the following:

1. To serve as a resource bank of evaluation instruments and processes
2. To develop and make available guidelines for the establishment of evaluation programs
3. To serve as a depository of summary information or surveys of evaluation results from around the country
4. To serve as a resource person bank for people with evaluation expertise in the area of alternative education
5. To conduct regional workshops which partially or totally focus on the problems of evaluation in alternative education.

These would seem to be appropriate and necessary roles for a body such as the consortium. Through this mechanism at the national level, local program efforts could be improved substantially and many of the problems which now exist in the area of alternative program evaluation could be significantly reduced.

In summary, as was previously stated, the age of accountability in education is here. Educational programs, particularly alternative programs face the choice of developing evaluation programs so that their effect can be assessed on their own terms, or to be evaluated on the basis of terms imposed by an outside agency. The best defense is a good offense - particularly in the field of alternative education.

This paper is a synthesis of ideas discussed in Work Group III at the Wingspread Conference on Educational Alternatives, April, 1972, Racine, Wisconsin.

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